



## GUEST OPINION ARTICLE

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*This guest opinion is by State Health Officer Terry Dwelle, M.D.*

*Length: Approximately 360 words*

### **Why Are Immunizations So Important?** **By State Health Officer Terry Dwelle, M.D.**

As parents, we are concerned about keeping our children safe and healthy. To protect them, we put them in child safety seats and install childproof door latches. One of the most important ways we protect our children is to follow the childhood immunization schedule and get them vaccinated against serious but preventable diseases.

Vaccines are one of medicine's greatest triumphs because they prevent serious disease and death. Many once-common diseases such as diphtheria, measles and polio are now only distant memories for most North Dakotans. Today we have few reminders of the suffering, disabilities and premature deaths caused by these vaccine-preventable diseases.

Many of today's parents have never even seen the diseases that vaccines prevent and don't fully understand the significance of following the childhood immunization schedule. Instead, a parent may ask, "Why does my baby need so many shots?"

Before age 2, every child should be immunized against 12 potentially serious vaccine-preventable diseases: measles, mumps, rubella (German measles), diphtheria, tetanus, pertussis (whooping cough), polio, Haemophilus influenzae type b (Hib disease), Hepatitis B, varicella (chickenpox), pneumococcal disease and influenza.

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Vaccines are given to babies and young children because the diseases they prevent are far more serious or common among this age group. For example, 90 percent of all deaths from whooping cough occur to children younger than 6 months of age.

Vaccinating a child according to the recommended immunization schedule protects not only that child but also the entire community. The 12 diseases that infant immunizations prevent still exist and circulate in many parts of the world. For children who are not immune, these diseases can lead to pneumonia, choking, brain damage, heart problems, liver cancer and blindness.

Governor John Hoeven has proclaimed April 24 through 30 as Infant Immunization Week in North Dakota. The theme of this year's event is *Vaccination: An Act of Love*. I can think of no better way to demonstrate your love for your children than to ensure they are immunized.

It's very simple – immunizations protect children. I encourage parents to make sure their infants and children are receiving the vaccinations they need to keep them safe and healthy.

-- 30 --